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ABSTRACT

A University of New Hampshire English department faculty member has been both a student and a teacher in the writing program. As a student she learned, over time, to do more writing in class, rather than in solitude. Time, topic, and structure limits came to be seen as liberating. The writing course encompassed not only conferences and full-class workshops, but reading groups, writing groups, a research project, oral presentations, debate, student-led exercises, responses to conferences, responses to groups, responses to collaborative projects, and double-entry journals. While one instructor developed the research project more fully, others worked to incorporate more reading into their classes. The faculty realized that while students had free choice regarding writing topics, readings were assigned. From then on, students were allowed to select readings and share them with the class. They also wrote five pages per week. The department community respects good writing and good teaching, so there is room for growth. (SG)

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Writers Welcome Here

Evolution Through Diversity: The University of New Hampshire's Workshop Model for Teaching Writing

I grew up in the UNH writing program--so my contribution to this session will be to tell some personal history that parallels and, I think, reflects the history of the program.

In 1973 I emerged from the back woods of New Hampshire and landed in Andy Merton's Prose Writing class. He was new to teaching then; now he is head of the compositon program. From him, I learned it was better to write about one day of summer vacation than the whole of it; that short sentences are, generally, stronger than long ones; and that a page without commas is to be respected.

This was all news to me.

From Donald Murray, I learned to believe in myself and my work. He has that effect on people. Mostly I learned about conferences. I remember the best one: I'd written on a broad, fruitless subject--something about kids watching too much television.

As I sat in Don's office, watching him read my essay, the true horror of the situation sunk in. Bad enough that I had written such an essay, but to inflict it on a reader, to

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inflict it on Donald Murray! I wanted to melt into the wood-grain of my chair.

Don finished reading, looked up.

He said: "Did you learn anything from writing this?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he said.

End of conference.

Don Murray--all those years ago--planted the seed for a belief that is now central to my teaching: trust the student, give the student room to teach herself.

In Tom Williams' fiction writing classes, I learned about workshops. Virtually every class was a workshop--with somebody's story copied for the group and discussed thoroughly. We talked character, theme, detail, commas.

From Tom I learned that precision leads to truth. And I learned the wonder of the captive audience: fifteen readers focused on my words, my work, readers who were also writers trying to help me see as I tried, in turn, to help them.

When I started teaching, as a graduate assistant, I used the models I knew--conference and workshop. Student writing was our text. Sometimes in class we'd talk about process, but mostly, we talked about student papers.

I had no syllabus. I assigned no readings. Students wrote and rewrote--five pages a week on topics of their choice. I shared my work, read what they had written and we talked together. That was it.

That was thirteen years ago--and the simplicity, the purity, the focus of that approach seem, in retrospect, quite sensible and appealing.

The next significant change in my teaching, I trace to a staff meeting. Gary Lindberg handed out natural objects--leaves, twigs, stones, zucchini--and we wrote about them. We described them in excruciating detail, pulled them apart, tasted them, speculated on possible uses, named them: then we wrote sentences, then we expanded the sentences to paragraphs.

I was inspired.

For a long time, I'd resisted in-class writing exercises. Classrooms were for lively talk about student work, not for writing. Writing required solitude.

But Gary's exercise turned me around. I discovered the delicious pressure of writing among other writers. I discovered the liberating effects of limits: time, topic, and structure limits. During the exercise, I wrote freely (my critic, for once, silenced) and surprised myself. I was surprised and impressed by what colleagues wrote too. One compared his zucchini to the Hindenberg.

This seemed to me quite profound.

So exercises became an important part of my writing classes.

At this time, the composition staff was meeting weekly. A tradition that continues--a tradition that encourages talk about teaching and formalizes the spread of ideas. It's the

common cold theory of administration: pass the germs hand to hand for awhile, but ultimately ask somebody--the germiest among us--to sneeze on the whole group.

I became infected many times. My teaching repertoire expanded in direct response to the enthusiasm, knowledge and skills of my colleagues. This is typical of our community: to be so challenged by the innovations of others that we can't help but innovate ourselves. The mid-eighties were for me, for many of us, a period of expansion. My course, at one time, encompassed not only conferences and full-class workshops, but reading groups, writing groups, a research project, oral presentations, debate, student-led exercises, responses to conferences, responses to groups, responses to collaborative projects, and, double-entry journals.

By the time Tom Newkirk took over the composition program, my courses were . . . busy, and the research paper loomed large. What had started as a small but direct link to writing for courses in other departments, unfortunately, developed a thyroid condition and grew, and grew, and threatened to eat us up. But . . . one of our colleagues, Bruce Ballenger, became fascinated with research writing in the broadest sense: consulting outside sources books, articles, experts, friends to build, examine, analyze one's own ideas. Bruce developed a four-week program--complete with exercises which no one adopted in its entirety (we're too independent for that) but which stimulated us and our students and helped renew enthusiasm for what became--

depending on the teacher and student inclination--the research paper/project/essay or collaboration. Bruce's book The Curious Researcher will be published soon by Allyn and Bacon.

Also, around this time Tom Newkirk, Donna Qualley, Barbara Tindall and others became enthusiastic about incorporating more reading in our classes, tapping strengths through written responses and analysis of readings. Typically, there was no mandate. But the more we discussed writing about reading, the more sense it made.

I had reservations: how can we fit everything in? Does more reading mean less writing? Does writing about reading mean less narrative, less argument, less emphasis on research?

Colleagues began to experiment. Theory was translated into practice--into specific activities. I could not resist. I did not resist.

This is how change occurs in our progam. One last example:

Several years ago, my friend Virginia Stuart, pointed out a contradiction in our classes. We allowed our students free choice of writing topics, but assigned readings--then wondered why many of our students seemed less than fascinated by those readings. The idea of choice in reading hit me hard--but development and application required time, freedom to experiment, and the support of the community. During this process, I came to believe more strongly than

ever, that students learn when they teach. Now, in my courses, students design writing exercises and lead them. They select favorite readings to share with the class. They choose authors as mentors, read books on their own, and teach us what they learn.

They still write five pages a week, with some short assigned exercises and readings, but after midsemester, most of class time consists of workshop (small or large-group) and student presentations on readings they have selected for themselves.

The course I teach now is not as simple as the one I remember so fondly from thirteen years ago, nor is it as complex as the one I was teaching four years ago. It is a course I'm excited about teaching right now--one that will change next semester and the semester after that.

Don Murray introduced the theology of discovery, set us, set me, on the road to discovery--write to learn, write to discover. Fundamental to the UNH composition program is choice. I choose to teach two courses each semester. I choose to modify my courses according to the needs of my students and my own needs and in the context of a stimulating teaching and writing community. This community respects good writing and good teaching. Here, there is room for discovery--and so there is room for growth.